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EMPEDOCLES; THE MAN, THE PHILOSOPHER, THE POET.*

LIFE.

THE philosopher Empedocles, according to the common tradition of antiquity, was born at Agrigentum in Sicily, and flourished just before the Peloponnesian war, the contemporary of the great Athenians about Pericles. He might have heard the *Prometheus* in the theatre of Dionysus and have talked with Euripides in the Agora; or have seen with Phidias the bright Pallas Athene on the Acropolis; or have listened in the groves beyond the city while Anaxagoras unfolded to him those half-spiritual guesses at the nature of the universe, so different from his own. He might: but the details of his life are all too imperfectly recorded. The brief references in other philosophers and the *vita* of Diogenes Laertius contain much that is contradictory or legendary. Though apparently of a wealthy and conservative family, he took the lead among his fellow citizens against the encroachments of the aristocracy; but, as it seems, falling at last from popular favor, he left Agrigentum and died in the Peloponnesus—his famous leap into Mount Aetna being as mythical as his reputed translation after a sacrificial meal. . . . But time

* The last number of *The Monist* contains a translation of the Fragments of Empedocles in English verse by Professor Leonard, a labor which so far as we know has never before been undertaken. In an article on this prominent Greek thinker our readers will find a clue to the significance of one of the most important philosophical systems of antiquity.—ED.

restores the exiles: Florence at last set the image of Dante before the gates of Santa Croce; and now, after two thousand years, the hardy democrats of Agrigentum begin to cherish (so I have read) the honest memory of Empedocles with that of Mazzini and of Garibaldi.

PERSONALITY.

The personality of this old Mediterranean Greek must have been impressive. He was not only the statesman and philosopher, but the poet. And egotistic, melancholy, eloquent¹ soul that he was, he seems to have considered himself above all as the wonder-worker and the hierophant, in purple vest and golden girdle,

"Crowned both with fillets and with flowering wreaths;"

and he tells us of his triumphal passage through the Sicilian cities, how throngs of his men and women accompanied him along the road, how from house and alley thousands of the fearful and the sick crowded upon him and besought oracles or healing words. And stories have come down to us of his wonderful deeds, as the waking of a woman from a long trance and the quite plausible cure of a madman by music. Some traces of this imposing figure, with elements frankly drawn from legends not here mentioned appear in Arnold's poem.

WORKS.

Of the many works, imputed to Empedocles by antiquity, presumably only two are genuine, the poems *On Nature* and the *Purifications*; and of these we possess but the fragments preserved in the citations of philosopher and doxographer from Aristotle to Simplicius, which,

¹ From Empedocles, indeed, according to Aristotle, the study of rhetoric got its first impulse. Cf. Diels's *Gorgias und Empedocles* in *Sitzungsberichte d. K. P. Akademie d. Wissenschaften*, 1884.

though but a small part of the whole, are much more numerous and comprehensive than those of either Xenophanes or Parmenides. It is impossible to determine when the poems were lost: they were read doubtless by Lucretius and Cicero, possibly as late as the sixth century by Simplicius, who at least quotes from the *On Nature* at length.¹

HISTORY OF THE TEXT.

The fragments were imperfectly collected late in the Renaissance, as far as I have been able to determine, first by the great German Xylander, who translated them into Latin. Stephanus published his *Empedoclis Fragmenta* at Paris in 1573. But not till the nineteenth century did they get the attention they deserve, in the editions of Sturz (1805), Karsten (1838), Stein (1852), and Mullach (1860), which show, however, confusing diversities in the readings as well as in the general arrangement. Each except Stein's is accompanied by Latin translation² and notes. But our best text is unquestionably that of Hermann Diels of Berlin, first published in 1901 in his *Poetarum Philosophorum Fragmenta*, and subsequently (1906), with a few slight changes and additions, in his *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*.

TRANSLATIONS.

As said above, there are several translations into Latin; all that I have seen being in prose, and some rather loose for the work of distinguished scholars. The late P. Tannery gives a literal French translation in his work on Hellenic Science, Diels in his *Fragmente* one in German, Bodrero in his *Il Principio* one in Italian, and Burnet and Fair-

¹ The writings of Democritus are conjectured to have been lost between the third and fifth centuries.

² I have not seen the original of Sturz's edition; but I gather from references in my reading that it contains a translation.

banks in their works on early Greek philosophy literal English translations, of which the former's is the better. There is one in German hexameters from the earlier decades of the last century; and a few brief selections in the English hexameters of W. C. Lawton may be found in Warner's *Library of the World's Best Literature*. Probably Diels does most justice to the meaning of Empedocles; none assuredly does any kind of justice to his poetry.

THE IDEAS OF EMPEDOCLES.

We can reconstruct something of Empedocles's system out of the fragments themselves and out of the allusions in the ancients; yet our knowledge is by no means precise. and even from the earliest times has there been diversity of interpretation.

The philosophy of the *On Nature* may be considered as a union of the Eleatic doctrine of Being with that of the Heraclitic Becoming, albeit the Sicilian is more the natural scientist than the dialectician, more the Spencer than the Hegel of his times. With Parmenides he denies that the aught can come from or return to the naught; with Heraclitus he affirms the principle of development. There is no real creation or annihilation in this universal round of things; but an eternal mixing and unmixing, due to two eternal powers, Love and Hate, of one world-stuff in its sum unalterable and eternal. There is something in the conception suggestive of the chemistry of later times. To the water of Thales, the air of Anaximenes, and the fire of Heraclitus he adds earth, and declares them as all alike primeval, the promise and the potency of the universe,

"The fourfold root of all things."

These are the celebrated "four elements" of later philosophy and magic. In the beginning, if we may so speak of a vision which seems to transcend time, these four,

held together by the uniting bond of Love, rested, each separated and unmixed, beside one another in the shape of a perfect sphere, which by the entrance of Hate was gradually broken up to develop at last into the world and the individual things,

"Knit in all forms and wonderful to see."

But the complete mastery of Hate, means the complete dissipation and destruction of things as such, until Love, winning the upper hand, begins to unite and form another world of life and beauty, which ends in the still and lifeless sphere of old, again

"exultant in surrounding solitude."

Whereupon, in the same way, new world-periods arise, and in continual interchange follow one another forever, like the secular æons of the nebular hypothesis of to-day.

Moreover, Empedocles tells us of a mysterious vortex, the origin of which he may have explained in some lost portion of his poem, a whirling mass, like the nebula in Orion or the original of our solar system, that seems to be the first stage in the world-process after the motionless harmony of the sphere. Out of this came the elements one by one: first, air, which, condensing or thickening, encompassed the rest in the form of a globe or, as some maintain, of an egg; then fire, which took the upper space, and crowded air beneath her. And thus arose two hemispheres, together forming the hollow vault of the terrestrial heaven above and below us, the bright entirely of fire, the dark of air, sprinkled with the patches of fire we call stars. And, because in unstable equilibrium, or because bearing still something of the swift motion of the vortex, or because of fire's intrinsic push and pressure—for Empedocles's physics are here particularly obscure—this vault begins to revolve: and behold the morning and the even-

ing of the first day, for this revolution of the vault is, he tells us, the cause of day and night.

Out of the other elements came the earth, probably something warm and slimy, without form and void. It too was involved in the whirl of things; and the same force which expels the water from a sponge, when swung round and round in a boy's hand, worked within her, and the moist spurted forth and its evaporation filled the under spaces of air, and the dry land appeared. And the everlasting Law made two great lights, for signs and seasons, and for days and years, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; and it made the stars also.

The development of organic life, in which the interest of Empedocles chiefly centers, took place, as we have seen, in the period of the conflict of Love and Hate, through the unceasing mixing and separation of the four elements. Furthermore, the quantitative differences of the combinations produced qualitative differences of sensible properties. First the plants, conceived as endowed with feeling, sprang up, germinations out of earth. Then animals arose piecemeal—he tells us in one passage—heads, arms, eyes, roaming ghastly through space, the chance unions of which resulted in grotesque shapes, until joined in fit number and proportion, they developed into the organisms we see about us. In another passage we hear how first rose mere lumps of earth

“with rude impress,”

but he is probably speaking of two separate periods of creation. Empedocles was a crude evolutionist.²

His theory of the attraction of like for like, so suggestive of the chemical affinities of modern science; his theory

² Some portions of the above paragraphs are translated and condensed from Zeller, some others from Vörländer, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, I. Band, Leipsic, 1903.

of perception, the earliest recognition, with the possible exception of Alcmaeon of Croton, of the subjective element in man's experience with the outer world; and his affirmation of the consciousness of matter, in company with so many later materialists, even down to Haeckel, who puts the soul in the atom, are among the most striking ideas of Greek philosophy.

Behind all the absurdities of the system of Empedocles, we recognize the keen observation, insight, and generalizing power of a profound mind, which, in our day with our resources of knowledge, would have been in the forefront of the world's seekers after that Reality which even the last and the greatest seek with a success too humble to warrant much smiling at those gone before.

THE POETRY OF EMPEDOCLES.

Empedocles and his forerunner Parmenides were the only Greek philosophers who wrote down their systems in verse; for Heraclitus had written in crabbed prose, and Xenophanes was more poet-satirist than poet-philosopher. Lucretius, the poetical disciple of Empedocles (though not in the the same degree that he was the philosophic disciple of Epicurus), is in this their only successor. Contemporary reflective satire and the metrical forms of the Orphics may, as Burnet conjectures, have suggested the innovation; but both Parmenides and Empedocles were poets by nature, and I see no reason why they should not naturally and spontaneously have chosen the poet's splendid privilege of verse for their thought.

The Ionic dialect of Empedocles's hexameters, and occasionally even his phrase, is Homeric; but in mood and manner, as sometimes in philosophic terminology, he recalls the Eleatic. Parmenides had written:

"And thou shalt know the Source ethereal,
And all the starry signs along the sky,

And the resplendent works of that clear lamp
 Of glowing sun, and whence they all arose.
 Likewise of wandering works of round-eyed moon
 Shalt thou yet learn and of her source; and then
 Shalt thou know too the heavens that close us round—
 Both whence they sprang and how Fate leading them
 Bound fast to keep the limits of the stars. . . .
 How earth and sun and moon and common sky,
 The Milky Way, Olympus outermost,
 And burning might of stars made haste to be.”*

And it is as if he were addressing the Agrigentine and bequeathing him his spiritual heritage; and we might add thereto those verses of another poet of more familiar times:

“And thou shalt write a song like mine, and yet
 Much more than mine, as thou art more than I.”

For, although Empedocles has left us no passage of the gorgeous imagination of Parmenides’s proem,¹ the ἱπποῖται μὲ φέρουσιν, his fragments as a whole seem much more worth while.

He was true poet. There is first the grandeur of his conception. Its untruth for the intellect of to-day should not blind us to its truth and power for the imagination, the same yesterday, to-day and perhaps forever. The Ptolemaic astronomy of *Paradise Lost* is as real to the student of Milton as the Copernican to the student of Laplace, and an essential element in the poem. The seven circles of the subterranean Abyss lose none of their impressiveness for us because we know more of geology than the author of the *Inferno*. The imagination can glory in the cross of Christ, towering over the wrecks of time, long after the intellect has settled with the dogmas of orthodoxy. And an idea may be imposing even for the intellect where the intellect repudiates its validity. A stupendous error like the Hegelian logic of history argues greater things for

* Parmenides, fr. 10, 11, Diels, FV.

¹ Diels, FV. Arnold has borrowed from it one of the best lines of *Empedocles on Aetna*:

“Ye sun-born Virgins! on the road of truth.”

the mind of man than any truth, however ingeniously discovered, about the cat or the cuckoo. And the response of the soul is a poetic response, the thrill and the enthusiasm before the large idea. The poet's conception is impressive to imagination and intellect: we stand with him amid the awful silence of the primeval Sphere that yet exults in surrounding solitude; but out of the darkness and the abyss there comes a sound: one by one do quake the limbs of God; the powers of life and death are at work; Love and Hate contend in the bosom of nature as in the bosom of man; we sweep on in fire and rain and down the

"awful heights of Air;"

amid the monstrous shapes, the arms, the heads, the glaring eyes, in space, and at last we are in the habitable world, this shaggy earth, this sky-roofed cave of the fruitful vine and olive, of the multitudinous tribes of hairy beasts, and of men and women,—all wonderful to see; for Empedocles is strikingly concrete. But the æons of change never end; and the revolution, as we have seen, comes full circle forever.

There is too the large poet's feeling for the color, the movement, the mystery, the life of the world about us: for the wide glow of blue heaven, for the rain streaming down on the mountain trees, for the wind-storm riding in from ocean, for

"Night, the lonely, with her sightless eyes,"

for the lion couched on the mountain side, the diver-bird skimming the waves with its wings, and

"The songless shoals of spawning fish"

that are

"nourished in deep waters"

and led, it may be, by Aphrodite.

There is the poet's relation to his kind, the sympathy with

"men and women, the pitied and bewailed,"

who after their little share of life with briefest fates

"Like smoke are lifted up and flit away;"

the interest and delight in the activities of man, how now one lights his lantern and sallies forth in the wintry night; how now another mixes his paints in the sunlight for a bright picture of trees and birds which is to adorn the temple; how now a little girl, down by the brook,

"Plays with a waterclock of gleaming bronze."

There is the poet's instinct, for the effective phrase, that suggests so much, because it tells so little; an austere simplicity that relates the author by achievement to that best period of Greek art to which he belonged by birth; and a roll of rhythm as impassioned and sonorous as was ever heard on Italian soil, though that soil was the birth-place of Lucretius. . . . But I am the translator, not the critic, of the poet.

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